

Article

Toward Buddhist Womanism: Tonglen Practice in *The Color Purple*

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Abstract: Tonglen is a Tibetan Buddhist practice that aims at developing the practitioner's bodhicitta. In this article, I argue that it not only finds expression in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* through the protagonist Celie, but adds more complexity to the womanist philosophy for which Walker has been ensconced in positions of influence. More specifically, Celie follows an implied Buddhist practice of tonglen; in the process of "taking in and sending out", her bodhicitta has been generated and cultivated. Underlying her tonglen practice is Buddhist womanism demonstrating how African American women can survive the social oppression and injustice by way of acknowledging their own terrible afflictions, empathizing with those enduring intense suffering, male and female, extending their loving kindness, comprehending the absence of intrinsic entity and the principle of dependent origination, etc. In addition, the article suggests that the fight for the survival of the oppressed is a type of Buddhist practice in Walker's Buddhist womanism.

Keywords: *The Color Purple*; tonglen; Buddhist womanism; bodhicitta



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1. Introduction

Owing to its profound contemplation of divine revelation and spiritual values, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* has generated a constant stream of scholarly criticism about its reevaluation of Christian beliefs and practices. Jeannine Thyreen's article, for instance, delves deep into the novel's "theological dimension", concluding that it "abandons a fixed, patriarchal notion of God for one that is more free, recognizing the Divine in all of creation and claiming the Spirit within the individual" (Thyreen 1999, p. 65). Furthermore, a widely disputed womanist theology has grown out of the philosophy of womanism that Walker creates and explores in all its complexity in *The Color Purple*, concentrating on the overriding concerns of this system of belief, such as

an orientation to Black women's survival in an oppressive social order that is classist, racist, and sexist; a framework for interpreting and critiquing the role of the Black Church; an interrogation of and critique of the Black Churches' appropriation of scripture in oppressive ways; a model for Black Women's organizational strength; a critique of Black social stratification, advocacy for justice-based spirituality. (Townes 2006, p. 1165)

Notwithstanding the theological analysis and the evolutionary development of womanist theology on the basis of *The Color Purple*, other religious and spiritual dimensions of the novel have been neglected. In her groundbreaking lecture at the first African American Buddhist Retreat, Walker announces, "My novel *The Color Purple* was actually my Buddha novel without Buddhism" (Walker 2007). Self-contradictory as it seems, her reflection clearly exemplifies the objection to labels and the importance of non-duality in Buddhist philosophy, suggesting that the novel carries underlying implications of Buddhist teachings or principles, albeit under the cover of Christian theology.

Two scholars have offered revealing insights into such a topic so far. In a paper selected in his *East–West Literary Imagination*, Yoshinobu Hakutani maintains that the central character, Celie, achieves self-realization and enlightenment with the help of Shug,

“annihilating the patriarchal and racist view of African American women and accepting her own body as beautiful and worthy of love and happiness” (Hakutani 2017, p. 222) at the same time. Additionally, Ike M. Johnson explores in great depth the Buddhist philosophy in *The Color Purple* including, for instance, dialectical reasoning, five clinging-aggregates, etc. However, the connection between Celie’s self-realization and African American women’s mutual care and Buddhist teachings have been left out of consideration.

For a long time, Walker has been a learner and practitioner of meditation, especially Buddhist meditation. As a student at Sarah Lawrence College, she read the Zen poems by the 17th-century Japanese Buddhist monk and poet Matsuo Basho. When she lived in Mississippi in the 1960s and 1970s, she “used to meditate in motel rooms” (Walker 2009). After a painful divorce in the 1970s, she had constant recourse to sitting meditation and practiced “Transcendental Meditation” which, according to her, focused solely on “the deeper value of sitting quietly, doing nothing” (Walker 2006, p. 73). Around 1974 when she met Jack Kornfield, a teacher of vipassana meditation, she began to practice meditation with her sangha (community) under his guidance, although these were the early years of the popularization of vipassana teachings in North America, when Kornfield himself was drawing on several different lineages of Burmese and Thai vipassana practice to formulate his teachings. It was in the year of 1995 when she lost someone she loved deeply that she came across the recordings of the Buddhist teachings by Pema Chodron, an American Tibetan Buddhist nun, and began to learn and benefit substantially from the ancient Tibetan Buddhist meditation named “tonglen”, together with the Buddhist teachings of “lojong” that accompanied it. In an interview with David Swick, Walker remarks, “I am so grateful to Pema Chodron for the gift of the practice of tonglen: taking in the bad and sending out the good. She has managed to absorb and preserve and present these ancient teachings in a form that is so current. I find tonglen one of the most important practices we could receive in this time” (Swick 2007).

Although it is at the close of the 20th century that Walker came across and embarked upon the practice of tonglen, signs of this Buddhist practice had already found their way into her 1982 *The Color Purple*. This argument, to start with, is built on a theoretical foundation, i.e., tonglen is practiced for the purpose of cultivating bodhicitta (the mind of enlightenment) for the practitioner himself or herself and others. Pema Chodron declares, “Doing tonglen is a gesture toward ripening your bodhicitta for the sake of your own happiness and that of others. Your own happiness radiates out, giving others the space to connect with their own joy, intelligence, clarity, and warmth” (Chodron 1991, p. 80). Cultivating and developing bodhicitta is one of the elemental teachings of Mahayana Buddhism, and Walker had earlier come across associated ideas in the Zen poems of the Japanese Buddhist monk and poet Matsuo Basho that she read as a college student, as these poems are widely acknowledged to be largely focused on the attainment of enlightenment. In addition, as an indispensable part of bodhicitta, deep compassion, according to Walker, has already been inherent in African Americans and become their “buddhanature”. Walker reveals, “This compassionate, generous, life-affirming nature of ours that can be heard in so much of our music, is our buddhanature. It is how we innately are. It is too precious to lose, even to disappointment and grief” (Walker 2007).

It is my contention that tonglen, a Tibetan Buddhist practice that aims at developing the practitioner’s bodhicitta, not only finds expression in *The Color Purple* through the protagonist Celie, but adds more complexity to the womanist philosophy for which Walker has been ensconced in positions of influence. More specifically, Celie follows an implied Buddhist practice of tonglen; in the process of “taking in and sending out”, her bodhicitta has been generated and cultivated. Underlying her tonglen practice is Buddhist womanism demonstrating how African American women can survive the social oppression and injustice by way of acknowledging their own terrible afflictions, empathizing with those enduring intense suffering, male and female, extending their loving kindness, comprehending the absence of intrinsic entity and the principle of dependent origination, etc.

It should be pointed out that the interaction between Buddhism and womanism, especially in Walker's works, has already been analyzed in some detail. In the 32nd and 36th volumes of *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, many great scholars explore this topic from different angles. Keri Day, for instance, explains fully how Walker's womanist thought engages Buddhist texts and practices to demonstrate their interconnection. With Walker as the primary case in point, Carolyn M. Jones Medine focuses on the practice in Buddhist womanist thought, maintaining that "Walker is pointing us to the importance of practice for survival in the midst of violence and oppression, but also for going beyond survival to healing by recognizing our own Buddha-nature and that of our ancestors" (Medine 2016, p. 17). In the fairly recent academic inquiry into the topic, Pamela Ayo Yetunde believes that Buddhism informs Walker's womanism, but it has "evolved over the decades without reliance on Buddhist thought" (Yetunde 2018, p. 19) and other philosophies, thus stressing the intimate connection between the two. Taken together, these scholars expound adequately "Buddhist Womanist thought" by amalgamating womanism, which generally concerns the commitment to the "survival and wholeness" of the oppressed, with Buddhist practice traditions that focus on overcoming suffering through a process of "healing". This article suggests, however, that this commitment is a type of Buddhist practice in Walker's Buddhist womanism, which also finds expression in Celie's implied tonglen practice in *The Color Purple*. Furthermore, it is hoped that researching Celie's implied tonglen practice will not only fill a gap in the interpretation of the novel, but provide some new insights into womanism and "Buddhist Womanist thought" that many great thinkers have already explored.

2. "Taking In and Sending Out"

The Color Purple, many critics maintain, explores African American women's search for and assertion of selfhood. As early as 1988, for instance, Ross argued, "The process of discovering or developing desires begins, for Celie, with the reappropriation of her own body . . . The repossession of her body encourages Celie to seek selfhood and later to assert that selfhood" (Ross 2008, pp. 3–4). Moreover, this topic has been critically examined from a wide variety of angles. By way of illustration, a psychoanalytic developmental reading reveals that "Celie is enabled to get in touch with her feelings, work through old traumas, and achieve an emotional maturity and a firm sense of identity that is psychologically convincing" (Proudfit 2008, p. 90).

As mentioned above, much has been said about how Celie affirms her identity as an African American woman through coming to terms with her own bodily and emotional sufferings. It can be argued, however, that in the novel Celie does not concentrate her attention on her own sufferings only, and her selfhood therefrom. Instead, Celie acknowledges and accepts her own as well as other African Americans' trials and tribulations in an attempt to help them disentangle themselves from their sufferings, which is essentially at the core of the tonglen practice.

Tonglen, according to Pema Chodron, refers to the practice of "taking in and sending out" (or in-breath and out-breath) (Chodron 1994, p. x), which is actualized in the following four stages. The first stage is "flashing openness, or flashing absolute bodhichitta" (Chodron 1994, p. 51). In the second stage, we engage ourselves in "working with the texture", in which we can "visualize breathing in dark, heavy, and hot and breathing out white, light, and cool" (Chodron 1994, p. 51). The third stage is "working with a specific heartfelt object of suffering. You breathe in the pain of a specific person or animal that you wish to help. You breathe out to that person spaciousness or kindness or a good meal or a cup of coffee—whatever you feel would lighten their load. You can do this for anyone" (Chodron 1994, p. 52). In the fourth stage, we "extend this wish to relieve suffering much further" (Chodron 1994, p. 53). In addition, there are two slogans that go along with this tonglen practice: "Sending and taking should be practiced alternately./These two should ride the breath" and "Begin the sequence of sending and taking with yourself" (Chodron 1994, p. 44). Underlying the first slogan is that "taking in and sending out" must be practiced

repeatedly and continuously, and the second slogan demands that tonglen practice should start with the practitioner's own happiness and suffering.

Although the tonglen practice that Pema Chodron teaches depends crucially on breathing, it is not always the case. Tsong-kha-pa, the great 14th-century Tibetan Buddhist monk and philosopher who popularized tonglen practice, gives high priority to the essential function that mind performs in this Buddhist practice. In the chapter entitled "Exchanging Self and Other" in *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*, for instance, when expounding how to exchange self and other, he suggests:

Therefore Santideva's statement above that you must "exchange your own happiness for other's suffering" means to view cherishing yourself as the enemy and then to stop emphasizing your own happiness. In addition, you must view cherishing others as a good quality, stop neglecting other's suffering, and instead emphasize the removal of their suffering. (Tsong-kha-pa 2004, p. 53)

What is implied in Tsong-kha-pa's guiding principle of tonglen is the mutual exchange between self and other with respect to their happiness and suffering by dint of "viewing"—i.e., contemplation and visualization—and putting it into action.

Therefore, at the center of the tonglen practice of "taking in and sending out" is, according to the aforementioned teachings of tonglen practice by Pema and Tsong-kha-pa, acknowledging and accepting one's own sorrows, empathizing with the sufferings of all beings, and extending loving kindness and happiness to them in the mind as well as in practice instead of merely breathing. Based on this interpretation of tonglen practice, this section aims to demonstrate that what Celie does to herself, her family, and fellow African Americans in *The Color Purple* is the Buddhist practice of tonglen, albeit under the guise of Christianity.

To practice tonglen, one has to start with recognizing and acknowledging his or her own affliction before "taking in" all sentient beings' because, according to Pema Chodron, "you feel rage, therefore you have the kindling, the connection, for understanding the rage of all sentient beings. First you work with your own klesha (obstacle); then you quickly extend that and breathe it all in" (Chodron 1994, p. 56). To put it differently, only when one feels and accepts his or her own sufferings and distress can he or she develop a deep empathy with all sentient beings. In other words, one "takes in" his or her own sufferings above everything else in the practice of tonglen.

In *The Color Purple*, despite the unbearable pain and sufferings she undergoes as an African American woman, Celie develops growing consciousness of her own affliction. It has been widely accepted that Celie is a hapless victim of race and gender-based discrimination and violence. Trudier Harris, for instance, generalizes about the victimization that Celie is subject to throughout the novel—Celie is "sexually abused, verbally dominated, and physically beaten for almost thirty years" (Harris 1986, p. 1). However, under Shug's guidance, she begins to foster strong awareness of her own abject misery. With Shug's kind encouragement, for instance, she reminisces about the brutal sexual assault by her stepfather: "I cry and cry and cry. Seem like it all come back to me, laying there in Shug arms. How it hurt and how much I was surprise. How it stung while I finish trimming his hair. How the blood drip down my leg and mess up my stocking. How he don't never look at me straight after that" (Walker 2017, pp. 102–3). This sad reflection of hers reveals that she is "taking in" her own misery of being a neglected, raped, and maltreated African American woman, i.e., she acknowledges her own suffering instead of precluding it.

It is only after her increased awareness of her own affliction that Celie is capable of "taking in" the pain and sorrows of other suffering African Americans. Giving instructions on how to practice "breathing in" in tonglen, Pema Chodron teaches, "You breathe that in, feeling it completely. It's the opposite of avoidance. You are completely willing to acknowledge and feel pain—your own pain, the pain of a dear friend, or the pain of a total stranger" (Chodron 1991, p. 84). It can be inferred from Pema's Buddhist teachings that having been conscious of one's own pain, one can feel the pain of his or her acquaintances or all sentient beings by extension, because "Only to the degree that we've gotten to know

our personal pain, only to the degree that we've related with pain at all, will we be fearless enough, brave enough, and enough of a warrior to be willing to feel the pain of others" (Chodron 1994, pp. 2–3).

In the fiction, having keen awareness of her own sufferings, Celie makes conscious attempts to feel and acknowledge the misery of other African Americans. An exceedingly fascinating blues singer desired by many black men notwithstanding, Shug Avery is considered in the black community as a violator of gender stereotypes, as Walton maintains that "Shug provides an ideal for Celie, since, unlike the other women in Celie's life, she is not broken through years of abuse. Pretty and different, she offers an alternative lifestyle" (Walton 2008, p. 72). She is therefore vociferously condemned in public by the preacher as "a strumpet in short shirts, smoking cigarettes, drinking gin. Singing for money and taking other women mens . . . slut, hussy, heifer and streetcleaner" (Walker 2017, p. 42). However, it is Celie who feels her difficult situation and extends genuine sympathy as she thinks to herself, "Streetcleaner. Somebody got to stand up for Shug, I think." (Walker 2017, pp. 42–43). Her positive reaction suggests that Celie can strongly feel the gender stereotyping a talented black woman is subject to and the intense sufferings it possibly inflicts upon her.

In addition, Celie "takes in" Sofia's pain and sufferings caused by the widespread racial discrimination. Investigating African American rage and racism, King declares that "Sofia, in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, is one of its most pitiful victims . . . she admits to a rage that survives years of spirit-breaking confinement in prison" (King 2008, p. 106). In reaction to Sofia's extreme victimization, Celie cannot help weeping bitterly; she admits, "My eyes git full of water and my throat close" (Walker 2017, p. 81). It is not difficult to perceive that she has felt the miseries of Sofia as an unfortunate victim of the institutionalized racism in America. By refusing to continue with the topic and breaking down in tears, she has in reality put herself in the shoes of the hapless victim.

It must be pointed out that Celie's acknowledgment of sufferings is not limited to the black females in the fiction. In spite of her strong aversion to Mr.—, "a nameless patriarch" (Winter 1992, p. 111) as claimed by Winter, Celie can feel his intense agony of not having married Shug against his father's will. Celie remarks, "I look at his face. It tired and sad and I notice his chin weak. Not much chin there at all. I have more chin, I think. And his clothes dirty" (Walker 2017, p. 46) because he realizes that he did not "fight for Shug" (Walker 2017, p. 46). In fact, underlying Mr.—'s agony is his father's entrenched sexual discrimination against Shug. What Celie feels, therefore, is the agonizing pain of "a nameless patriarch" at the mercy of an even more powerful patriarch.

As demonstrated above, what Celie does to herself and other Blacks precisely corresponds with the essence of "in-breath" in tonglen practice, i.e., acknowledgment and acceptance of one's own as well as other's pain and sorrow. As Pema remarks, "The essence of tonglen practice is that on the in-breath you are willing to feel pain: you're willing to acknowledge the suffering of the world. From this day onward, you're going to cultivate your bravery and willingness to feel that part of the human condition" (Chodron 1991, p. 80).

More importantly, a practitioner of tonglen has to "breathe out" his or her happiness and kindness after "in-breath", which encapsulates the very essence of the "out-breath" in tonglen practice. As Pema notes,

The essence of the out-breath is the other part of the human condition. With every out-breath, you open. You connect with the feeling of joy, well-being, satisfaction, tenderheartedness, anything that feels fresh and clean, wholesome and good . . . You connect with that and you breathe it out so that it spreads and can be experienced by everyone. (Chodron 1991, p. 81)

More than just a breathing practice, "out-breath" likewise suggests massively extending one's compassion and ultimately alleviating all sentient beings' sufferings. Expounding the fourth stage of tonglen which focuses principally on the "out-breath" practice, Pema thus teaches, "The *fourth stage* extends this wish to relieve suffering much further . . .

Simultaneously, you send out spaciousness or cheerfulness or a bunch of flowers, whatever would be healing, to your uncle and all the others. What you feel for one person, you can extend to all people" (Chodron 1994, p. 53). Therefore, it is for the purpose of showering people with deep compassion and relieving them of their miseries that one practices "out-breath".

In the fiction, by lavishing great kindness upon the suffering blacks and helping alleviate their misery, Celie is in reality practicing "out-breath" in the tonglen. To pacify the terribly sick Shug, for instance, Celie extends warm hospitality, showing her great patience and cooking her superb food despite her conscious awareness of Shug's adulterous relationship with her own husband. In addition, she brings peace to the incarcerated Sofia by means of treating her bruises and swelling in prison and, more importantly, saying to her comfortingly after her release: "Too many to kill off, I say. Us outnumbered from the start. I speak we knock over one or two, though, here and there, through the years" (Walker 2017, p. 93). "Breathing out" compassion, Celie not only attempts to put them out of miseries, but at the same time poses a significant challenge to the dual oppression of racism and sexism that African American women are miserably subject to.

Similar to her "in-breath", Celie's practice of "out-breath" is not strictly restricted to the black females in the fiction; she extends kindness by helping Mr.— rebel against his headstrong father and thereby presents a challenge to the deep-rooted sexism in the African American community. Hearing the news that Mr.— has taken Shug in his home, Old Mr.— visits him to voice his serious objection because of Shug's considerable notoriety. Unexpectedly, Celie mischievously "drop little spit in Old Mr.— water" (Walker 2017, p. 52). Not only does her mischief display her compassion and support for Mr.— on that issue, but speaks of her questioning of Old Mr.— and the widespread sexual discrimination that he supports in the black community. In brief, with her loving kindness for her fellow African Americans desperately struggling against the deep-seated racism and sexism, male and female, Celie lives up to the principle of "sending out" in the tonglen practice, i.e., "we are also willing to breathe out our feelings of well-being, peace, and joy. We are willing to give these away, to share them with others" (Chodron 1991, p. 77).

In summary, Celie lives up to the tonglen principles of "taking in and sending out" throughout the novel. As demonstrated above, her own terrible sufferings do not result in her complete breakdown. Instead, she consciously and intentionally stays open to her own deep misery under Shug's guidance, acknowledges the affliction of her fellow African Americans, and finally extends to them loving kindness by relieving their abject misery. Although she knows nothing about the Buddhist practice of tonglen, what she does broadly corresponds with the fundamental lojong teachings that come with the tonglen practice, i.e., "The basic notion of lojong is that we can make friends with what we reject, what we see as 'bad' in ourselves and in other people. At the same time, we could learn to be generous with what we cherish, what we see as 'good'" (Chodron 1994, p. 6).

It should be pointed out that Celie's tonglen practice in the novel has a positive impact on her fellow African Americans, especially Mr.—. With Celie's loving kindness, Mr.— has undergone a remarkable transformation by showing deep concern for her and helping her make inquiries about Nettie; to some extent, they form a "sangha" that is characterized by mutual compassion and support. What is implied in his transformation is that the practice of tonglen is not all about the practitioner himself or herself, but can exert an evidently beneficial influence on other beings, i.e., the recipients of this Buddhist practice, and help them develop consciousness of their negative emotions and show compassion.

3. Generating Bodhicitta

The Color Purple, according to many critics, epitomizes Alice Walker's highly original womanist philosophy. According to Musanga and Mukhuba, for example, there lies in Celie's gradual transformation from a submissive and voiceless "nobody" to an independent black woman Walker's celebration of womanism, because "Two important womanist concepts namely 'family' and 'sisterhood' inform this metamorphosis as Walker

underscores her commitment to the survival and wholeness of African American people” (Musanga and Mukhuba 2019, p. 388).

Mounting a counterattack on Afrocentrism, black feminism, and white feminism, Alice Walker brings into the foreground the more universalist, pluralist, and inclusive ideas of womanism. In her comprehensive definitions of this term in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, some theoretical claims made by Walker can demonstrate these unique features, as evidenced in the following statement:

Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist.” (Walker 1983, p. xii)

In contrast to white feminism or black feminism, womanism is apparently characterized by its inclusiveness, non-separatism and universalism, which find expression in the claims such as “loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually” and “loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually”. According to Few’s observation, therefore, “womanism is a pluralist vision of black empowerment and consciousness” (Few 2007, p. 5266). In a similar vein, Collins points out its origin of African American pluralism: “This meaning of womanism also invokes another major political tradition within African-American politics, namely, a pluralist version of Black empowerment” (Collins 1998, p. 63).

The fiction does flesh out some of the aforementioned notions that womanist philosophy contains, for instance, “loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually” as demonstrated by a number of critics. However, it is more than womanist considering the tonglen practice of “taking in and sending out” implied in the story. It can be argued that while Celie, according to many critics, has achieved self-consciousness and self-realization in light of Walker’s womanism, what she has cultivated through her tonglen practice is in actuality bodhicitta.

As the principal purpose of tonglen practice, cultivating and generating bodhicitta is one of the fundamental teachings in Mahayana Buddhism. Literally translated as the mind of enlightenment, bodhicitta is believed by some schools of Mahayana Buddhism to be inherent in every sentient being; the development and achievement of bodhicitta is the path to Buddhahood. According to many Buddhist classics—Shantideva’s *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, for instance—bodhicitta incorporates two essential aspects—the ultimate and the conventional. The ultimate bodhicitta can be defined as “the mind stream of a Bodhisattva or Buddha endowed with compassion and directly cognizing emptiness” (Williams 1989, p. 199) from the point of view of a Prasangika Madhyamika, and the conventional bodhicitta, subdivided into aspiring and engaging bodhicittas, refers to a Bodhisattva’s strong wish and firm action of helping all sentient beings and achieving enlightenment. Therefore, the compassion for others and the consciousness of emptiness become two cardinal aspects of bodhicitta, as Paul Williams points out, “it is only said to be bodhicitta if the compassion is embedded in an awareness of emptiness. Thus bodhicitta is said to have the nature of emptiness and compassion” (Williams 1989, p. 199).

The abovementioned two cardinal component parts of bodhicitta demonstrate themselves in Celie’s tonglen practice in the fiction. Firstly, there is no doubt that underlying Celie’s practice of “taking in” other blacks’ unimaginable hardship and “sending out” her loving kindness is the profound compassion for those in suffering, which fully conforms to the womanist philosophy as demonstrated in Walker’s claims such as “the survival and wholeness of all people regardless of race, class, gender, or sexuality”.

Aside from compassion, Celie displays the Buddhist teachings of emptiness in the process of practicing tonglen, which adds more complexity to Walker’s womanist philosophy. Emptiness (sunyata in Sanskrit) is not essentially equivalent in meaning to nothingness; rather, it is the ultimate truth about everything. According to the Madhyamaka school of Mahayana Buddhism, emptiness “is clearly neither nothingness nor the absence of

existence, but rather the absence of a falsely imagined type of existence, identified as *svabhāva*. Because all phenomena are dependently arisen, they lack, or are empty of, an intrinsic nature characterized by independence and autonomy" (Buswell and Lopez 2014, p. 872). To put it differently, every phenomenon comes into existence only because of other phenomena in a tangled web of cause and effect; as a consequence, it does not possess an utterly independent, substantial and unchanging essence or self-existence. In brief, every phenomenon is essentially empty yet existent because of dependent origination.

What is implied in this Buddhist notion of emptiness is that any phenomenon, including love, kindness and compassion that are widely extended to all sentient beings, is in essence empty of an independent self-existence. Therefore, we would better observe the fundamental principle of dependent origination or arising instead of developing strong clinging to and subsequently fretting about it. This Buddhist wisdom of emptiness adequately demonstrates itself in Celie.

To begin with, it is under the spiritual guidance of Shug that Celie exhibits this unconventional wisdom. Many critics think highly of Shug as Celie's mentor in Christian philosophy. Ross's opinion provides a good case in point: "Shug teaches Celie to find God in herself, in nature, and in her own feelings, including erotic ones" (Ross 2008, p. 6). From the vantage point of Buddhist philosophy, however, Shug plays the significant role of a Buddhist master who provides Celie with the fresh inspiration of emptiness notwithstanding her ignorance of this Buddhist wisdom. In her clarification of her own unique understanding of God in Christianity in the story, Shug's words unravel the mystery of the very essence of emptiness. She opines, "I believe God is everything . . . that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. And I laughed and I cried and I run all round the house" (Walker 2017, p. 176). Her witty remarks that she is "part of everything, not separate at all" coincide to a large extent with the fundamentals of emptiness, as all phenomena, according to the ancient Indian Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna, "are part of a causal and conceptual flow" (Williams 1989, p. 69), hence complete absence of intrinsic existence. For that reason, it can be inferred from "God is everything" that every single existence, God included, is dependently originated, and therefore intricately interconnected by nature.

This complicated Buddhist wisdom implied in Shug's inspiring statement finds an echo in Celie, as she likewise uses "I say, Everything" (Walker 2017, p. 199) to stress the humming noise's dependent origination and intrinsic emptiness. Moreover, she puts into operation the Buddhist teachings of emptiness while following her practice of tonglen. In the first place, despite her earlier strong compassion and affection for Shug, Celie comes to the gradual realization of the empty nature of their close intimacy after Shug's departure with her new lover Germaine. Slightly frustrated by Shug's delayed return, she thinks to herself, "But now Shug's six months is come and gone and she ain't come back. And I try to teach my heart not to want nothing it can't have" (Walker 2017, p. 242). Later, she adds, "Sometimes I feel mad at her. Feel like I could scratch her hair right off her head. But then I think, Shug got a right to live too" (Walker 2017, pp. 243–44). As suggested in Celie's immediate reaction, she regards her intimate relationship with Shug, including her profound compassion for her, as dependently originated and thus empty, in that she ceases to be excessively obsessed with Shug and lets her go when she makes her own life choice.

By the same token, Celie's gradual transformation in her attitude towards Mr.— is characterized by intrinsic emptiness. In spite of her practice of tonglen on Mr.—, Celie still feels intense loathing for him, as manifested in the "Big a devil" (Walker 2017, p. 201) she purposefully employs to refer to him. Following Shug's departure with Germaine, however, she eventually realizes that she does not find him utterly abhorrent, because "One, he love Shug. And two, Shug use to love him. Plus, look like he trying to make something out himself" (Walker 2017, p. 236). What is implied in Celie's transformation is that her attitudes towards Mr.—, compassion or abhorrence, likewise lacks intrinsic existence, because they all "originate in dependence on causes and conditions" (Williams 1989, p. 69). She holds him in abomination because of his brutal treatment of Nettie, but

provides him with support owing to his helplessness and powerlessness in front of Old Mr.— and Shugs’ infatuation with him. In the conclusion of the story, Celie spends some pleasant time chatting and sewing with him, which indicates that her changing reactions to Mr.— are also entirely based on conditions and therefore lack intrinsic or inherent existence.

It is worth mentioning that emptiness in bodhicitta is the distinctive feature that clearly differentiates Buddhist womanism in the novel from Walker’s womanist philosophy. Although Walker must have already learnt about bodhicitta, what her womanism displays is the compassion in the teachings of bodhicitta only. Therefore, she puts considerable emphasis on the love for other women and individual men in her definition of this concept. Aside from compassion, however, emptiness features prominently in the Buddhist womanism in the novel, as suggested in Celie’s gradual realization that what she does and feels lacks intrinsic existence, whereas it never gets a mention in Walker’s womanist philosophy.

4. Conclusions

Taken together, from the vantage point of Buddhism, what Celie does throughout the story is the Buddhist practice of *tonglen* for the purpose of generating bodhicitta, i.e., compassion and emptiness. More specifically, as a member of the black community, especially black women, Celie not only acknowledges, feels, and “takes in” her own intense sufferings and by extension the terrible sufferings of other African Americans, but “sends out” her loving kindness and cheerfulness to them. In the process, her bodhicitta has been generated and cultivated, i.e., “the warmth of compassion—that pervades the space” (Chodron 1994, p. 12)—the loving kindness for all beings regardless of their genders, races, classes, etc.—and the realization that everything, the compassion included, “is empty of intrinsic existence because, being the result of causes and conditions, it is thereby dependently originated” (Williams 1989, p. 70). This practice of Celie’s, therefore, can be expediently named Buddhist womanism.

Womanism, according to Paludi, “affirms female strength, fights oppression, and prompts collective social justice” (Martin 2010, p. 37). To some extent, Buddhist womanism likewise addresses the issues of racism and sexism and demonstrates a commitment to the “survival and wholeness” of the oppressed in that, as shown above, Celie makes every endeavor to feel African Americans’ sufferings and help alleviate their misery by interrogating the deep-seated traditions and values.

However, in Buddhist womanism, this activism can be regarded as a type of Buddhist practices. In the textual analysis above, Celie does pose a serious challenge to racism and sexism, but she does not intend to fight as a warrior. Instead, she simply follows the implied *tonglen* practice of “taking in and sending out”, i.e., feeling one’s own and others’ sufferings and extending loving kindness to them by fighting the underlying social evils. In other words, her struggle is likewise Buddhist. When asked about her activism by Judy Lief in a conversation with Pema Chodron, Walker acknowledges that she should stand up against social evils, but that “my activism really is for myself . . . I felt this incredible opening, a feeling of finally being at home in my world, which was what I needed. I needed to feel I could be at home there, and the only way was to actually go and connect with the people” (Chodron and Walker 1999). To rephrase it, her activism is also the way she practices Buddhism, i.e., the practice of being open to her own as well as others’ fear and then bringing relief. This feature of Buddhist womanism is similar to the fundamental principle of Engaged Buddhism that Walker is believed to be associated with, i.e., “the engagement is not separate from Buddhist spirituality, but is very much an expression of it” (King 2009, p. 1).

Before I conclude, it is absolutely necessary to differentiate Buddhist womanism implied in Celie’s *tonglen* practice from Buddhist feminism, a subdiscipline that can be hardly classified into either Buddhist or feminist philosophies. Having attracted inadequate attention yet serious criticism, Buddhist feminism, according to Sokthan Yeng, “like other forms of Buddhism and feminism, can encompass variance” (Yeng 2020, p. 144), and is therefore far from consistent in its theoretical assumptions. I will concentrate my attention

on Rita M. Gross and Sokthan Yeng, the two leading scholars of Buddhist feminism who have pioneered this area of academic research or expounded their strong viewpoints under the rubric, in an attempt to unravel the critical distinction between Buddhism womanism and the preceding school of philosophy.

According to Rita M. Gross, a widely acclaimed spokesperson for Buddhist feminism, the socially constructed gender bears a striking resemblance to a “prison” for both males and females, as manifested in the term “the prison of gender roles” (Gross 2018, p. 38) she coins; clinging to gender identities has inflicted intense suffering on both men and women. To alleviate their pain and suffering, Gross maintains, one can practice contemplating the egolessness of one’s gender identity, i.e., “gender is conditioned and relative, the interdependent result of certain causes and conditions, and does not color the enlightened or the natural state of mind in any way” (Gross 2018, p. 30). It is not difficult to perceive that the common denominator between Buddhist womanism and Buddhist feminism is their serious concern for both males and females, and their special emphasis on the absence of intrinsic entities in everything, gender identity included. Unlike Gross’ Buddhist feminist philosophy which primarily pivots on the liberation from one’s own “prison of gender roles”, Buddhist womanism, as manifested in Celie’s implied tonglen practice, attaches importance to the deliberate consciousness of any suffering—not merely the suffering caused by gender stereotypes—and the deep compassion and its empty nature necessary for the alleviation of pain.

In addition, in *Buddhist Feminism: Transforming Anger against Patriarchy*, Sokthan Yeng examines how Buddhist and feminist philosophies can be brought together to effectively tackle anger and other “problems caused by patriarchy and discriminatory structures” (Yeng 2020, p. 146). For that purpose, she sketches out three patterns for Buddhist feminism, including “an emphasis on relationality, attention to the body, and the call to recognize anger” (Yeng 2020, p. 3), giving high priority to the role of Buddhist teachings, such as no-self, non-discrimination, mindfulness, etc. Without doubt, the Buddhist feminist philosophy advanced by Yeng places special stress on the subjugated women’s bitter anger and its alleviation by means of Buddhist teachings. By contrast, in the Buddhist womanism implied in Celie’s tonglen practice, the sufferings of both males and females are equally addressed, and the deep compassion for the suffering beings in order to lift them out of afflictions is one of its principal purposes.

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